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ABSTRACT

A current trend in composition consider writing a social act where texts are produced because of and in response to social contexts. Classroom practices are just beginning to change and acknowledge the power that discourse communities assert on writers. Composition teachers must also acknowledge the importance of community-governed reading strategies. Several strategies help students learn to read and analyze texts in various academic fields. Limited by a one-semester course, the goal is to begin the process whereby students learn to read the texts of and write for particular discourse communities. A good way to approach the study of texts with students is to have them identify ongoing debates in their fields. Students should be encouraged not to focus exclusively on surface conventions, for they do not expose the underlying assumptions that characterize a community's view of the world. Students in the course select disciplines to explore, define the boundaries of their fields, and generate a list of texts (focusing on journal articles) that are representative or considered authoritative. Students analyze texts, noting such aspects as: (1) what assumptions writers accept; (2) what expectations there are for readers; (3) how arguments are presented; (4) what constitutes acceptable evidence; (5) what patterns recur in terms of presentation and format, and (6) what general similarities are exhibited by groups of texts. Focusing on of discourse communities is important because an understanding of the existence of such communities is the first step in being able to write within one. (Two examples are attached.) (RS)

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Reading Processes:
Responding to Discourse Community Constraints

One of the current trends in composition is the notion that writing is a social act where texts are produced because of and in response to social contexts. Texts are shaped, influenced, and constrained by the community in which a writer works. In a similar way, the meanings that a reader constructs are shaped, influenced, and constrained by the community through which one reads texts, and even more importantly, through which one "reads" the world.

While social theories of writing are gaining acceptance as valid theories, classroom practices are just beginning to change to acknowledge the power that discourse communities assert on writers. But focusing on writing is not enough. Composition teachers must acknowledge the importance of community-governed reading strategies. Similar to the discourse conventions exhibited by the texts of a particular community, so too can one find evidence of particular ways community members read and construct meaning. If one of the goals of a writing class is to enable students to write texts that are acceptable in the communities they wish to enter, then composition teachers must focus on the ways readers of specific academic and professional communities construct texts as well as the way writers do.

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I have found several strategies for helping students learn to read and analyze texts in various academic fields. I used these strategies in a composition class for college sophomores, juniors, and seniors that focused on academic writing, through a writing across the curriculum perspective. I need to begin my discussion, though, with some definitions. There is some disagreement about the definition of discourse community, but the definition I am using here is based on language use. A discourse community is a group whose members share particular ways of using language that imply certain views of the world. James Porter says a "'discourse community' is a group of individuals bound by a common interest who communicate through approved channels and whose discourse is regulated" (38-39). Similarly, James Berlin uses the term in locating "language at the center of the formation of discourse communities which in turn define the self, the other, the material world, and the possible relations among these" (184). Lester Faigley suggests that a discourse community is a language community where "people acquire specialized kinds of discourse competence that enable them to participate in specialized groups" (238). The members of a discourse community, then, are bound together by conventions that govern both their language use and their means of interacting with and interpreting the world.

Studying the texts of a particular discourse community is complicated by questions of the community's boundaries. I had the students begin by focusing on disciplines because disciplines are historically separated, but I acknowledge that a discipline is not necessarily a single discourse community. Although there

is some overlap, disciplines tend to have somewhat recognizable boundaries, which is an important consideration when working with students unfamiliar with looking at differences in language use. Janice Lauer has identified some of the features of a discipline, including: a special set of phenomena to study, a characteristic mode or modes of inquiry, theoretical ancestors and assumptions, an evolving body of knowledge, and epistemic courts by which knowledge gains status. Surface features include a departmental home, a characteristic ritual of academic preparation, and scholarly organizations and journals (20). One could list the features of the texts of a discipline by characterizing the articles accepted by the scholarly organizations and journals of the field. The idea of creating such a list is problematic, though, because it assumes that the features can be identified and explained independently of each other. In actuality, the way a discipline uses language defies simple description and analysis. Because of the diversity within a discourse community, one could never identify all the conventions that the accepted texts exhibit, due both to the number of features to be analyzed and a lack of consistency in the features that are exhibited. In addition, because of the dynamic nature of a discourse community, even if one could identify all conventions, the field would change before the task was completed. The goal in having students analyze the texts of a discourse community, then, is so they identify <u>some</u> conventions that are currently exhibited by accepted texts. Giving students the strategies for analyzing texts is giving them a foundation from which to build. My focus here is only to <u>begin</u> the process whereby students learn to read

the texts of and write for particular communities. Even after an entire semester of reading and analyzing texts in their field, students have a long way to go before being socialized into a disciplinary community, if, indeed, that is what they choose to do.

A good way to approach the study of texts with students is to have them identify on-going debates in their fields. Charles Bazerman follows a similar line in suggesting students should "consider each piece of writing as a contribution to an on-going written conversation. Conversation requires absorption of what prior speakers have said, consideration of how earlier comments relate to the responder's thoughts, and a response framed to the situation and the reader's purposes" (657). Students begin by reading texts in their fields to analyze current conversations. Next, students look for patterns that run through groups of texts without expecting to identify a definitive list of features, or even a central feature, that every acceptable text exhibits. While students should realize that the patterns they note are not universal features, creating lists of some features is a worthwhile exercise in helping students become aware of disciplinary conventions.

Before describing these strategies in more detail, I have one caution. Studying a community will necessitate close attention to texts. However, there is the danger that students will focus exclusively on surface conventions, which are important in their own right but do not expose the underlying assumptions that characterize a community's view of the world. For example, noting what sections, such as procedure and results,

are included in reporting empirical research is important for a student who is writing a report for a research journal; however, in order to produce an effective report the student will also have to understand what constitutes an acceptable procedure and a valid presentation of results in that field. Some attention to surface conventions, though, is a necessary step. Writers need to mimic and try on the ways in which a community uses language in order to gain an understanding of the conventions. The danger in focusing too heavily on surface conventions is that students may not consider the underlying views of reality if too much emphasis is placed on correctly using surface conventions. In some ways the problem is similar to focusing too heavily on mechanics and correctness in teaching writing. If early in their writing processes students concentrate on making their texts error-free, there is the danger that they will focus on <u>how</u> they are writing at the expense of <u>what</u> they are writing. Another danger in focusing on surface conventions is that students begin to regard such conventions as absolute standards, viewing them as formulas and algorithms that must be followed when writing rather than heuristics and flexible patterns of language use that are often used.

Now I will get into some specific strategies and examples. Students will enter the discussion of disciplines and discourse communities with some preconceived ideas about what constitutes the fields and the texts of the fields that they are examining. Students often regard the ideas presented in scholarly texts and the formatting conventions as having absolute authority; they would not consider the possibility that the ideas could be

questioned or debated by others in the field. Indeed, one of the dangers of focusing on academic communities is that students can fail to see the constant strife. As Kurt Spellmeyer reminds us, "the world of academic discourse is especially precarious because its posture of methodical objectivity demands the concealment of those transgressions which are as essential to learning as they are to the formation of new knowledge" (718). One important result of a focused study of discourse communities is that students will broaden their perspectives of the fields they are preparing to enter. Indeed, the new attitudes students develop toward the complex nature of text production is an important outcome.

EXAMPLE: Business (facts/statistics vs. issues/positions--see copy of transparency in appendix)

What I am doing with this approach is helping students develop a sensitivity to language use in their fields. For example, most students would say that they understand a term like "rigor." Various communities use "rigor" as one criterion for determining a good study; however, the rigor expected in setting controls in a physics experiment is quite different from the rigor of a critical reading of a literary text. Even within similar or a single discipline, the term changes. The rigor of an empirical experiment in composition is different from the rigor of an ethnographic study of writing. Each of these studies would have to follow certain accepted procedures and standards to be considered good research, but clearly each study would be judged by its own set of standards. Students need to be made aware of and more sensitive to such differences.

The course itself has two parts or strands. Many of the reading and analyzing strategies should be introduced to students with readings in common. I use a writing across the curriculum textbook. The other part of the course is the students' research into their own fields. Students select disciplines to explore. They define the boundaries of their "fields," which is highly motivational and allows students to follow their own interests and set their own goals. Students begin by identifying texts that are representative or those that are considered authoritative works. Students can create lists of the important works and journals by interviewing professors and upper-level students about which texts and journals are most widely read, by skimming textbooks to see what specific texts and journals are included, and by reviewing journal articles to see what texts and authors are most often cited.

Once these lists are gathered, students begin reading and analyzing specific texts. Students should focus on journal articles because those texts represent the current written conversations of the discipline. Students may need to do some background reading to understand many journal articles. Most fields have some journals that are accessible to college students, but some students may need to look at their fields through articles written to non-specialists. A chemistry major may have difficulty understanding articles in any chemistry journal because the texts are written by scientists for scientists. Instead, the student can examine science articles written for other audiences, comparing articles in science magazines like Nature and Scientific American to science articles

in popular magazines like Discover, Time, and Newsweek. Students will begin to see that writing as a member of a field is determined by much more than topic.

Students should read the texts at first for content; if they are to enter the written debate, they need to begin by learning what has been said previously. Students then analyze the texts, noting such aspects as what assumptions writers accept, what expectations there are for readers, how arguments are presented, what constitutes acceptable evidence, what patterns recur in terms of presentation and formatting, and what general similiarities are exhibited by groups of texts. The types of analysis students are expected to do are modeled in the classroom with the shared readings, so there is constant interaction between the two strands of the course. When I first started teaching the writing in the disciplines course, I was amazed at how difficult it was for students to identify textual conventions, and it seemed to be a losing battle to get students beyond surface features. I am now convinced that the way to do this is to focus on reading strategies.

EXAMPLE: Abstracts--memory experiment (psychology journal--see copy of transparency in appendix)

The goals of introducing students to the notion of discourse communities are for students to become aware of the existence of such communities, to gain some understanding of how and why they exist, and to learn some methods of identifying and following the conventions of a particular community. Note that the goals do not include students writing texts that would be accepted by an academic or professional community outside the classroom,

although students will be encouraged to experiment in imitating the conventions of the texts they are studying. It is unrealistic to think that students can master the conventions of a particular discourse community without being part of that community unless surface conventions are the primary, or only, consideration. It is unrealistic to expect composition teachers to respond as members of communities that they are not part of and to evaluate student writing as members of such communities. And it is unrealistic to expect students to be able to effectively use conventions, especially those that deal with such underlying premises as what constitutes truth or knowledge in their fields, within the time span of one semester.

It is clear that in a semester-long writing course that focuses on academic disciplines students will not learn to write as members of their chosen academic and professional fields. But teaching students about discourse communities will better allow them to make informed choices concerning when it is appropriate to accommodate, or to oppose, or resist the conventions of a particular community. A course focusing on a study of discourse communities is important because an understanding of the existence of such communities is the first step in being able to write within one. Such a course will necessarily focus on critical reading strategies.

Appendix

Transparency 1

Business:
Facts and Statistics or Issues and Positions?

One semester a student informed me that he could not take a stand on an issue in his field because business was a field of facts and statistics, not of issues and positions. To describe the texts of the field, he examined business publications such as The Wall Street Journal and Fortune and reported his findings:

> They deal with facts and figures almost all of the time, these publications like to give out as much information as possible, they give a little advice and express little to no opinion. It is pretty much all facts in the field of business.

However, when this same student described why people in business regularly read such publications, he reported:

> They need information that will help them solve problems and make choices in today's society.

Having to regularly read current publications in his field for my class changed the student's perspective:

> I used to read The Wall Street Journal every once in a while and never really got into it. . . . Recently I started to read it again in a new perspective, and I see all of the facts that I thought were simply useless and that I thought were unnecessary were really just helpful little facts to people who are in the field of finance.

Note that the student still sees The Wall Street Journal as presenting facts and not taking positions on issues in the field, but he has broadened his view on the importance of reading such texts. He summed up his new perspective by saying:

> Now I can relate to what professors and students were saying. I am trying to read the paper before I go to [finance] class because when I get to class, students and teachers are discussing things that are in the morning's newspaper.

This student now sees a connection between the texts of the field and the material discussed in class.

Transparency 2

from "Long-Term Memory for a Common Object"
by Raymond S. Nickerson and Marilyn Jager Adams
(Cognitive Psychology)

Abstract: A series of experiments was done to determine how completely and accurately people remember the visual details of a common object, a United States penny. People were asked to: draw a penny from unaided recall; draw a penny given a list of its visual features; choose from among a list of possible features those which do appear on a penny; indicate what was wrong with an erroneous drawing of a penny; and select the correct representation of a penny from among a set of incorrect drawings. Performance was surprisingly poor on all tasks. On balance, the results were consistent with the idea that the visual details of an object, even a very familiar object, are typically available from memory only to the extent that they are useful in everyday life. It was also suggested that recognition tasks may make much smaller demands on memory than is commonly assumed.

Analysis of Abstract:

1. purpose of experiments
2. tasks
3. results
4. explanation/discussion/conclusions/implications

Group 1

Abstract: An experiment was done to determine how completely and accurately people remember the visual details of a common object: a United States nickel. The subjects were required to draw from memory the front and back sides of a nickel.

Group 2

Introduction: In this experiment people were given sheets of paper with the name of a coin on it and asked to describe what the coin looked like. The participants were asked to give as much information on what the coin looked like as they could. For instance, the participants were asked to describe who was on the coin, any memorable phrases, positions of the phrases, years, etc., in other words, anything they could remember. The coins used were quarters, dimes, and nickels. This group will be analyzing those who had the dimes specifically.

Group 3

Abstract: An experiment was done to determine how accurately people remember how a quarter is designed on the front and back side. People were asked to draw a quarter by how they remember it. The performance was fairly poor.

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